Discovery of Ground Water Contamination

In the more environmentally aware states, state and local environment and public health officials have often been the first to discover ground wat contamination and recognize its impact on public health. This is frequent the case in states where there has developed environmental health comp tence particularly with regard to the impact of environmental contamin tion on human health and a long tradition of protecting drinking wat supplies. Noteworthy among these states is California, where this traditi< of confronting potential health problems began several decades ago with £ pollution episodes and has been reinforced among public health offici* attempting to control pesticide poisonings among farm workers.

Individual citizens and citizen groups have, with increasing frequenc become important in exposing potential water contamination and other e vironmental problems. Although this is particularly the case in states whe aggressive environmental or public health agencies have not taken hold, it true in all states. Citizens are alerted by strange tastes or odors in drinkii water or ill health in the community. Concerned citizens have banded t gether in grass roots organizations that are active in identifying and allevia ing sources of pollution and compensating victims. National environment organizations have encouraged grass roots activities with campaigns "hunt the dump." It is difficult to assess the true impact of concerned cil zens on the identification of potential sources of ground water contamin tion and the demand for corrective and preventive measures. Howeve California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York are excellent exan pies where citizens groups have been particularly active and have played z important role in development of remedial and preventive ground wat< programs.

The news media have been very important in drawing public attention 1 pollution events. The treatment that the news media give to cases of grour water pollution appears to vary significantly with the source of discover Release of information by governmental officials is often handled diffe ently from problems revealed by pollution victims. For instance, in Tucsoi Arizona, the failure of public officials to follow up on potential health e fects of trichloroethylene (TCE) discovered in the municipal water suppi provided grist for an investigative reporter who responded to citizen health complaints by doing a house-to-house survey. The media handling < pollution events has an important impact on public confidence in state pr< grams.

On Long Island, the media have been a major factor in the success of tit ground water protection program. The program was strongly supported t a major local newspaper. Newsday gave in-depth coverage to the 208 pla